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Andriana Bruno

Unveiling Populism: A Discourse Analysis of Populist Leaders' Language on Immigration in the United States and Hungary (2016-2020)

Abstract

This paper addresses the political phenomena of the rise of populism in Western democracies, specifically focusing on the United States and Hungary. The research hypothesizes that populist leaders such as Trump and Orbán manipulate language surrounding immigration within their public speeches to negatively influence the perception of immigration in their respective countries. A discourse analysis is conducted which seeks to identify the quantitative occurrence of unmitigated pejoratives such as 'illegal', 'alien', and 'migrant' in a selection of four speeches from each leader ranging from 2016-2020. The use of rhetorical devices such as appeal to emotion and eulogy are also explored within the transcripts. The data shows that Trump and Orbán effectively cultivate a negative perception of immigration using some overlapping rhetorical techniques in addition to methods which are unique to each leader.

Introduction

Populist leaders such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán have achieved great electoral success by exploiting public fears and threatening the fundamental pillars of democracy. It is imperative for us to understand how they have manipulated the

language within their speeches to influence political ideologies. This research is the first step taken towards developing a comparison between President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán regarding commonality in language regarding immigration. This approach differs from others because it works to find commonality in the use of language surrounding the issue of immigration between President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, attempting to support the hypothesis that the language selected by each of these leaders in their speeches is tailored to elicit negative feelings regarding the topic of immigration.

Literature Review

The literature presented will be organized by country, beginning with the United States, and being followed by Hungary. Substantial literature already exists in reference to both leaders' individual use of the issue of immigration as a means for political success. Literature can be found regarding the recent rise of right-wing populism in the United States, with specific focus on Donald Trump and his manipulation of the immigration debate (Beland, 2020). Additionally, the contextualization of Donald Trump's electoral success within the history of populism in American politics, while also analyzing his campaign platform and its main tenets of anti-globalism and anti-immigration rhetoric has been achieved in existing scholarship (Campani et al., 2022).

In the European context, the 2015 Refugee Crisis serves as a critical juncture which explains the anti-immigration speech being utilized by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Significant literature has been written since 2010– when Orbán assumed leadership of Hungary- much of it analyzing his populist qualities. There is substantial literature evaluating Orbán's response to the refugee crisis of 2015, detailing the emergence of the crisis in Hungary and evaluating the policy choices made by Hungarian political authority (Cantat et al., 2019). Existing research has effectively established Orbán's utilization of the crisis as a means for expansion of political support and the implementation of anti-refugee initiatives.

Previous scholarship has also addressed the impact of the dehumanization of Muslim refugees during the refugee crisis in four different European countries (including Hungary), evaluating in what regions the rhetoric was stronger and how that influenced policies towards refugees during the crisis (Bruneau et al., 2018). This literature strengthens the argument that language surrounding immigration has been manipulated by populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán, as a means of political success. Additionally, a critical juncture is presented which serves to guide the research timeline.

While previous studies have separately examined the speeches of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán, no research has evaluated them in the same study. Comparing these two leaders is valuable as they both served concurrently, and despite governing on opposite sides of the world, they addressed increasing tensions related to immigration in a similar manner throughout their terms. To compare the anti-immigration rhetoric of both leaders, it is useful to utilize methods used in previous discourse analyses. Valuable research exists regarding the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Donald Trump and conservative media outlets. Quinonez (2018) conducted a thorough analysis utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to evaluate over one-hundred speeches, addresses, and remarks delivered by Donald Trump before and after the 2016 Presidential election. Aperocho et al. (2022) also analyzed the rhetorical tools utilized in Donald Trump's political speeches such as metaphorical approaches, semantic expressions, linguistic features, and classification of ideologies. The research concluded that the use of such discourse can be extremely influential in determining how politicians manipulate speech to express their ideology on specific issues.

Regarding Viktor Orbán, there is noticeably less discourse analysis available, although there are some existing studies on the subject. Mendelski (2019) analyzed the anti-immigration rhetoric of Viktor Orbán through an alternative method of discourse analysis which posited that Orbán approaches the issue

through a binary framework, characterized by and outside-inside logic. Evaluating the discourse of both Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán using similar criteria will be useful in establishing a connection between the rhetorical techniques employed by both leaders in their respective speeches.

Within the field of International Relations, an explanation for the rise of populism remains a point of contention among scholars as they attempt to understand what societal factors have had the greatest influence on the voting behavior of the electorate. In previous decades, economic conditions were the most prominent indicator of voting outcomes. Zakaria (2016) writes that a shift has begun, as a convergence in economic policy across political parties has led to the emergence of culture as the crucial difference between 'left' and 'right' parties. This transformation can be ascribed to the surge of globalization in the Western world, wherein not only the global exchange of goods, services, and information has expanded, but also the global movement of people. Such change in societal dynamics can lead to apprehensions about displacement, job loss, or other economic stresses as a nation absorbs a growing number of immigrants. Nations with insufficient leadership, unable to manage the integration of immigration, have witnessed a surge in populism, fueled by politicians who capitalize on fears and prejudice. Immigration has become a volatile issue on which populists are united among themselves and vehemently opposed to their elite adversaries. This research is guided by the hypothesis that populist leaders in countries such as the United States and Hungary have exploited the societal shift which has taken place and manipulated their use of language surrounding immigration for political benefit.

Previous work is substantial in the elaboration upon the influence of immigration on electoral outcomes and the recent success of populist leaders. Additionally, scholarship exists regarding what factors have contributed to the rise of populism in the West. Current scholarship is lacking a necessary discourse analysis of how

language surrounding immigration has been weaponized as a means for expanding political success by both Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán.

Methodology

To test the hypothesis that the language selected by each of these leaders in their speeches is tailored to elicit negative feelings regarding the topic of immigration, a discourse analysis was conducted with four selected speeches from both Former President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Orbán, taking place between the years 2016 and 2020 (Trump 2018, Trump 2019a, Trump 2019b, Trump 2020, and Orban 2016, Orban 2018a, Orban 2018b, Orban 2019, respectively). Careful attention was taken into selecting these specific speeches to ensure that a valid comparison could be made between both leaders. The criteria for selection included that the speeches be made to a national audience, to ensure that they had equal potential influence on the electorate. Additionally, these speeches were chosen because they span throughout the four-year period in which the terms of Former President Trump and Prime Minister Orbán overlap. This period was selected as it marked a crucial period in global politics, characterized by ongoing debates regarding immigration spanning Europe and North America. This discussion was influenced by the European Refugee Crisis and the escalating tensions regarding border security between the United States and Mexico.

As criteria for the discourse analysis, I have chosen to examine 'unmitigated pejoratives' around immigration. 'Unmitigated pejorative', according to Quinonez (2018), is "a term that is intentionally derogatory with no attempt at mitigation" (Quinonez, 2018, p. 36). Within this research, the unmitigated pejoratives such as 'alien' and 'illegal' were utilized to assess the speeches of both Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. These words were selected as they are used often in speeches in replacement of the word 'immigrant' which holds an impartial meaning. The terms are, "a type of reductive, single-axis rhetoric which serves to objectify and

dehumanize immigrants and reinforce their status as *others*'' (Quinonez, 2018, p. 40). The use of the term 'migrant' is a point of contention among the international community, as the United Nations defines the term as "any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born and has acquired some significant social ties to this country" (Freedom for Immigrants, 2018, n.p.). However, in the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis, media outlets such as Al Jazeera have openly criticized the term, asserting that European politicians have misused it by employing it in contrast with the term 'refugee'. This has transformed the term into another rhetorical tool which dehumanizes and creates distance. For the sake of this research, the term 'migrant' was treated as a negative descriptor when analyzing the speeches of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, due to the controversial nature of this term in the European context. In reference to the speech contents of Former U.S. President Donald Trump, the term 'migrant' was regarded as a neutral term. It is significant to note that although the term 'refugee' was selected in the preliminary research design, the term did not appear in any of the selected speeches.

In addition to identifying unmitigated pejoratives within the speech transcripts, this research also examined the text for rhetorical devices which manipulate the feelings of the audience. This criterion is based on Aperocho et al. (2022), who identify the use of appeal to emotion and eulogy as rhetorical devices which influence the audiences' perception of immigrants. These strategies were employed in the speeches of each leader to underscore the urgency of eradicating illegal immigrants from the United States, and, in the Hungarian context, of expelling all immigrants.

These methods of language manipulation have been identified and analyzed in the selected speech transcripts of Former President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, with the overarching goal of supporting the hypothesis that both leaders have manipulated the language in their speeches to evoke negative

feelings regarding immigration. The process of data analysis occurred in two phases. Phase one included reading the speeches and quantitatively tracking the explicit use of unmitigated pejoratives such as 'alien', 'illegal' in comparison to the use of the terms 'immigrant' and 'migrant' in the case of Donald Trump. Regarding Viktor Orbán, the term 'immigrant' was exclusively compared while the term 'migrant' was included with the unmitigated pejoratives. Phase two entailed identifying and analyzing the rhetorical approaches of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán in these speeches. This included drawing attention to key phrases, repeated sentiments, and all other examples of the implementation of the rhetorical devices detailed in the literature. Following these steps, the discourse analysis on the speeches of both leaders was completed.

Data Analysis

The data reveals that while both Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán discuss immigration negatively in their speeches, the rhetorical methods which both leaders use to accomplish this vary.

Quantitative Findings

A discourse analysis was conducted which identified unmitigated pejoratives and quantitatively noted their presence in the speeches of both Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. Regarding Donald Trump, the unmitigated pejoratives included 'illegal' and 'alien'. The data reveals that within the four selected speeches, Donald Trump employs the word 'alien' disproportionately more than any other word used to characterize an immigrant. The word 'alien' was often in combination with the word 'illegal', therefore, instead of treating them as separate terms as noted in the original methodology, they have been regarded as one term for the sake of the data analysis. Within the four selected speeches, Trump used the word 'alien' or the phrase 'illegal alien' twenty-one times. This is in vast contrast with the use of alternative terms such as 'migrant' or 'immigrant ', both used three times within the four speeches. These terms have been identified as impartial verbiage in the

American political context.

When conducting the discourse analysis of unmitigated pejoratives utilized by Viktor Orbán, different criteria were applied. This was due to the controversy regarding the use of the term 'migrant' in the European context, which emerged following the 2015 European Refugee Crisis. The terms 'alien', 'illegal', and 'migrant' were chosen as the unmitigated pejoratives when studying the four selected speeches of Viktor Orbán, however, 'alien' and 'illegal' did not appear once in the transcripts. Orbán used the term 'migrant' twenty-three times throughout his speeches, while using the term 'immigrant' almost equally, twenty times.

The quantitative findings of Viktor Orbán differ significantly from that of Donald Trump, where it can be argued that Trump's greater usage of negative terms to describe immigrants signifies an effort to negatively influence the rhetoric regarding immigration. In contrast, Orbán's nearly equal use of terms with both negative and neutral connotations may signify an unanticipated impartialness in language usage throughout his speeches regarding immigration.

Analysis of Rhetorical Devices

Due to the time limitation of this study, the rhetorical devices employed in each respective speech were not quantitatively measured based on their occurrence, rather, significant, or repeating sentiments were identified and compared between both leaders. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the following rhetorical devices used by these leaders: those aimed at evoking emotion such as fear, nationalistic sentiments, and sympathy.

Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump concurrently employ the rhetorical device of emotional appeal in their speeches; however, they differ in the specific emotions they invoke. Orbán consistently invokes the sentiment of nationalism throughout his speeches, focusing greatly on the cultural influence of 'migrants'. Orbán contends in multiple speeches that immigrants threaten the Hungarian national identity and European culture in its entirety, which has become 'overrun' by Muslim

immigrants. In Orbán (2018b), he states, "The good soldier does not fight because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is in behind him, because he loves Hungary and the Hungarians" (2018, p.2). This statement invokes nationalist sentiments in the listener. By framing discussions of immigration in the context of war, Orbán suggests that Hungarians should perceive immigrants as a threat. This choice of language casts immigrants in a negative light and diminishes their individual hardships, such as experiences with war, famine, or other dire circumstances which would lead to them seeking asylum in Hungary.

Throughout the selected speeches, Trump and Orbán consistently employ the emotion of fear. Within his speeches, Donald Trump establishes a connection between the rise in drugs and crime in America to illegal immigration from South America. This linkage serves to rationalize his political objective of constructing a solid barrier, commonly referred to as 'the Wall', along the Southern border of the United States, a project that faced a lack in terms of support and funding throughout his term. In Trump (2018), he states, "And the southern border is a big problem, it's a tremendous problem for drugs pouring in and destroying our youth, and really, destroying the fabric of our country" (2018, p.9). Orbán similarly uses fear to shape the discourse on immigration by insinuating that immigrants, specifically from Muslim countries, pose a threat of terrorism to Hungary. In Orbán (2016), he states, "We do not want to–and we shall not– import crime, terrorism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism into Hungary" (2016, p.18). This statement suggests that immigrants pose a risk to Hungarian nationals, eliciting fear and reinforcing prejudices which Europeans may harbor towards Muslim countries. Both leaders strategically manipulate language surrounding immigration in their speeches, depicting immigrants negatively and attempting to persuade their citizens to oppose immigration.

Donald Trump utilizes the rhetorical device of 'eulogy' to evoke feelings of

sympathy and intensify fears related to immigration. Throughout the selected speeches, Orbán does not utilize this rhetorical device. In three of the four selected speeches, Donald Trump utilized a eulogy. This device was employed to dehumanize immigrants in the eyes of American voters, portraying them as a threat rather than as individuals in need or facing challenges. In Trump (2019a), he states, "Over the years thousands of Americans have been brutally killed by those who illegally entered our country and thousands more lives will be lost if we don't act right now. This is a humanitarian crisis, a crisis of the heart and a crisis of the soul" (2019, p.2) This usage of language serves to manipulate the listener and negatively influence their feelings regarding immigration.

It is worth noting that throughout the eight speeches analyzed within this study, only one attempt at humanizing immigrants was made. In Orbán (2016), he states, "Although emergencies do not favor nuanced thinking– and refined feelings even less– it is hardly the migrants whom we should be angry with. The majority of them are also victims" (2016, p. 14). This stance, which differs from Donald Trump, has a contrasting effect compared to other rhetorical devices used in the selected speeches. This language seeks to humanize immigrants and elicit feelings of sympathy towards them. It stands as the sole instance of such an attempt spanning through the entire selection of speeches.

Conclusion

This research has provided insight regarding the manipulation of language surrounding immigration by Western populist leaders, specifically Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. The findings reveal that while both leaders employ rhetorical devices such as appeal to emotion in a similar way, there are also distinctions between them in other aspects. Within the selected speeches, Donald Trump utilized descriptors of immigrants with negative connotations disproportionally more than the use of neutral terms. In contrast, Viktor Orbán used negative and neutral descriptors nearly equally, however, portraying immigration negatively with

descriptions and alternative rhetorical devices. Donald Trump employed eulogies frequently, while Orbán invoked nationalist sentiments in every speech. Both leaders utilized the emotion of fear when describing the potential effects of immigration in their countries.

Due to the time constraint of this study, the effectiveness of this manipulation of language on voting outcomes was not analyzed. Exploring this aspect would be a valuable next step for further research in this field. This research is valuable to the study of International Relations as it identifies the tools which populist leaders utilize as a means for influencing political ideology, highlighting the great importance of specific language and its effects on discourse surrounding immigration or any given issue. This research has adequately linked the usage of rhetorical devices and unmitigated pejoratives by populist leaders Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán by identifying their similarities and differences over the concurrent four-year period. As populism continues to ascend globally, it is imperative for both politicians and voters to comprehend the ways in which language can be manipulated, in order to make informed political decisions.

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